School Site Visits:

What can we learn from choice schools in Milwaukee?

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SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation
Report #34
February 2012

The University of Arkansas was founded in 1871 as the flagship institution of higher education for the state of Arkansas. Established as a land grant university, its mandate was threefold: to teach students, conduct research, and perform service and outreach.

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The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), based within the Department of Education Reform, is an education research center devoted to the non-partisan study of the effects of school choice policy and is staffed by leading school choice researchers and scholars. Led by Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, Professor of Education Reform and Endowed 21st Century Chair in School Choice, SCDP's national team of researchers, institutional research partners and staff are devoted to the rigorous evaluation of school choice programs and other school improvement efforts across the country. The SCDP is committed to raising and advancing the public's understanding of the strengths and limitations of school choice policies and programs by conducting comprehensive research on what happens to students, families, schools and communities when more parents are allowed to choose their child's school.

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DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

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Executive Summary

The School Site Visits study is part of the fifth series of annual reports produced by the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP). It describes some of the major challenges experienced and common practices demonstrated by thirteen (13) K-12 schools participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). During the 2010-11 school year, there were 107 religious and secular schools participating in the MPCP. This report is based on visits to six of the high schools and seven K-8 schools that collectively reflect the wide range of characteristics associated with participating schools. This includes whether schools scored above or below average on the 2010-11 Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations in math and reading. Teams of researchers from the SCDP conducted one-day visits to each school during the spring and fall of 2011. Using a variety of interview, survey and observation instruments, the research teams gathered information about school practices in six general areas: (1) school culture, (2) student academic success, (3) effective leadership, (4) teacher quality, (5) religious integration and accommodation, and (6) school facilities. We use the data collected during the visits to describe the most common challenges the schools face and the common practices and strategies they use to overcome these challenges. Overall, a number of general lessons were learned.

Lesson I: Academic Challenges

Interviews with teachers, students and administrators at most of the high schools revealed that many choice students who arrive on their campuses are behind academically; in some cases by two or more grade levels in multiple subject areas. Interviews with teachers and administrators at the high school level indicate that while significant efforts are often made to accelerate student development, some students cannot close the gap in the four years they are with the schools. This affects whether schools can invest in college preparation versus career development. At both the high school and K-8 levels, mentoring systems are in place in many schools to help new students assimilate. This practice is particularly effective in schools with a diverse student body because it helps to build relationships and community between students of different achievement levels, ages, and ethnic backgrounds.

Lesson II: Postsecondary Preparation

College attendance was emphasized in some of the K-8 and all of the high schools. At one K-8 school, for instance, this is reflected in the school motto: "Christ, College and Character." This school begins preparing students for college in Pre-K when they are addressed by the year they are expected to graduate from college. Likewise, one high school has an intense focus on preparing every freshman for college admission. Entering freshmen complete an interest inventory, followed by an occupational assessment, to help students begin to explore possible career options. During their freshman and sophomore years, guidance continues via use of the WISCareers website, which enables students to identify potential career opportunities and obtain information on all the colleges in the state that have related programs. A guidance counselor at this school emphasized the importance of talking to students from the moment they arrive in ninth grade about their life plans after graduation.

Lesson III: Teacher Quality

Schools in the sample with a clear mission and a well-defined set of professional development practices tend to be very successful in recruiting and retaining teachers. These schools have formed strong partnerships with teacher preparation and degree granting programs across the city and state. In some cases, prospective teachers are specifically seeking positions in schools with the religious orientation or student development philosophy these schools embody. It appears that teachers seeking positions with these schools view the curriculum, professional development and other aspects of the school as consistent with their "career pathway." The schools that fall into these categories are often able to retain teachers for ten years or more and promote many of them to leadership positions. In contrast, teacher recruitment and retention

is a particular challenge for many of the newer schools in our sample. The less successful schools in the area of teacher recruitment also experience greater teacher turnover, and they are more likely to rely on financial incentives to recruit and retain teachers.

Lesson IV: Effective Leadership

A majority of respondents at each school cited school leadership as one of the most significant influences on student and school success. In general, shared responsibility for leadership was considered to be the most effective model. School leadership was frequently described as a very complex set of roles and responsibilities that cannot be adequately performed by a single individual. School size and financial resources appear to be the most significant influences on the type of leadership model that is adopted. The larger schools are more likely to use the team or shared leadership approach, which allows them to draw from a variety of talents, expertise and interests that exist among teachers and administrators. These schools seem to have an in-house pipeline of candidates who are being prepared to assume important leadership roles. In contrast, the smaller schools in our study, at both the K-8 and high school levels, face resource constraints that do not permit them to adopt a team model. As a consequence, they often rely on a single dynamic school leader capable of managing all aspects of instruction, operations and finance, with very modest administrative and other supports.

Lesson V: Religion and Integration

During the school visits, we attempted to better understand how the choice program has influenced the religious orientation of the schools that emphasize specific practices and traditions as part of their school model. As several principals affiliated with schools that existed before MPCP noted during their interviews, participation in the program over time has changed the demographics of their student body. The change in the student body has brought challenges relating to the integration of families that appreciate the academic reputation but who do not participate in the religious traditions of their school. Additionally, this has raised concerns among some school stakeholders about whether enrolling students from other religious backgrounds may weaken the culture and community. Most teachers and administrators from the older schools, however, emphasized the importance of nurturing a community that is tolerant of everyone's beliefs and religious practices, and they appreciated how the choice program has helped to diversify their schools.

Lesson VI: Facilities and Infrastructure

Each school we visited was well maintained and appeared to be very safe. However, the facilities and infrastructure varied greatly. There appears to be a close association between the length of time a school has existed and the overall quality of the facilities and infrastructure. Many of the schools that have been in existence for fifty years or more were mainly located in very traditional buildings or campuses, whereas most of the newer and specialty schools were located in unconventional or temporary facilities. A good range of amenities, such as libraries and other learning resources; large indoor and outdoor common spaces; computers and other technology, etc., were generally found in the older schools. These amenities were less common in the newer and specialty schools, in which there was a need to rely on more creative ways to maximize space and support learning.

1. Introduction

In an attempt to better understand and describe schools participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), a team of researchers from the School Choice Demonstration Project visited six high schools in Milwaukee during the spring of 2011, and seven K-8 schools during the fall of 2011.[1] The purpose of the visits was to document the general challenges these schools face and the common practices they use to improve student and school outcomes. We assume here that all schools are committed to student academic development, high school graduation and post secondary success. However, the challenges schools face and the strategies they develop to overcome them influence whether they are successful in reaching their goals.

In 1995, the MPCP expanded beyond an initial set of small secular schools to include religious schools. Thus, the religious orientation of many choice schools makes them distinctively different from other public schools, which are prohibited from religious practices and traditions. According to the 2011 Descriptive Report on Participating Schools, 90 of the 107 MPCP schools that participated in the Program during the 2010-11 school year described themselves as religious schools.[2] However, under Chapter 119 of the Wisconsin State Statutes, no private school may require a student to participate in any religious activity if their guardian has requested an exemption from such activities.[3] As a result, students not affiliated with the religious tradition of a particular school may enroll in that school without pressure to participate in the school's religious practices.

Methods

In selecting schools for this study, the goal was to achieve a sample that would be reflective if not representative of all schools participating in the MPCP. We also planned to visit a representative set of Milwaukee Public Schools but the central administration denied us access to any of their public schools. To select high schools, we ranked all schools participating in the MPCP on 2010-11 Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE) scores and used this list to group them into two categories based on student achievement on the WKCE. Within each above and below average category, we randomly selected three schools and requested their permission to conduct site visits. If a school did not accept our invitation, we randomly selected another school within the same performance grouping. We conducted a similar procedure at the K-8 school level but sought also to incorporate particularly unique schools. We achieved this by creating an additional category for "special" schools serving a distinctive population; adhering to a particular theory of education; or exhibiting other unique institutional characteristics.

The school visits included interviews with school leaders, guidance counselors, teachers, students, parents and other members of the school community, as well as observations of common areas such as the cafeteria

1 The research teams included members from the School Choice Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Baltimore based research and consulting firm Qwaku & Associates.

2 McShane, M.Q, Kisida, B., Jensen, L.I. & Wolf, P.J. (2011) Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive Report on Participating Schools 2010-11 (Report No. 33, p. 14). School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas.

3 Wisconsin Statute Chapter 119 First Class City School System, 119.23 (2009). Available at: https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/119.pdf

and libraries. Our goal was to capture as much information about the school as possible within one day. The visit typically started at the beginning of the school day and ended around the time students went home. The research team members were only provided with very general information about the schools to which they were assigned so that the process of data collection would not be influenced by any preconceived ideas about each school's performance.

We promised the participating schools that we would not mention them by name, nor would we report any identifiable characteristics of their schools. Therefore, we present the results of the research only by topic area, synthesizing the interview and observation data, and summarizing common challenges and practices without associating them with specific schools.

Characteristics of the Schools

In addition to their ages and levels of development and stability, there was also considerable variation in the size of the schools that we studied; for example in the school year 2010-11, enrollments at the high schools in our sample ranged from approximately 200 to almost 800 students. During this same year, enrollments at the K-8 schools in our sample ranged from just over 30 to more than 350 students.

The high schools included three schools that have been in existence for 20 years or less, and two that were founded in direct response to the choice program. The three remaining schools have been in existence for at least 56 years, with the oldest school founded approximately one hundred years ago. Two out of the three older high schools have multiple buildings or campuses. In order of youngest to oldest, they are designated HS1-6. (A general description and the codes used in the report for each high school and K-8 school are shown in Tables 1-4).

The schools in our sample exhibited high levels of diversity, with percentages of racial minority students varying between 35% and 100%. Several of the schools serve highly disadvantaged student bodies and, as a result, face particularly acute social and academic challenges. Levels of academic achievement varied widely between the schools.

The mean 10th grade WKCE reading scale score for the entire sample of MPCP and public schools combined was 479, with a standard deviation of 59. The high schools in our sample were categorized in Table 1 by reading performance, based on their distance from the mean. The ranges in Tables 1-4 for total students and choice students are rounded to the nearest ten so that specific schools cannot be identified.

Table 1: High School Rankings based on WKCE Reading Scale Scores

Performance Ranking	School Code Name	School Age	Religious?	WKCE Score	Total Students	Choice Students
Above Average	HS6	60-110 years	Yes	486-512	680-1,100	30-80%
	HS4		Yes			
	HS5		Yes			
Below Average	HS2	Under 10 - 40 years	Yes	432 -469	180-260	90 – 100%
	HS1		Yes			
	HS3		Yes			

The mean 10th grade WKCE math scale score in 2010-11 was 512, with a standard deviation of 44. The high schools in our sample have been ranked in Table 2 (below) by math performance, based on their distance from this mean.

Table 2: High School Rankings based on WKCE Math Scale Scores[4]

Performance Ranking	School Code Name	School Age	Religious?	WKCE Score	Total Students	Choice Students
Above Average	HS6	20-110	Yes	529-536	680-800	30-50%
	HS4		Yes			
Below Average	HS2	Under 10 - 90 years	Yes	423-495	180-1,100	90-100%
	HS1		Yes			
	HS5		Yes			
	HS3		Yes			

Of all Milwaukee schools serving grades 3-8 for which we have WKCE data for 2010-11 there were 86 private elementary/middle schools participating in the MPCP with 9,611 students and 137 public schools with 25,745 students. The mean WKCE reading scale score for grades 3-8 for the entire sample was 455,[5] with a standard deviation of 54. The elementary/middle schools in our sample have been ranked in Table 3 (below) by reading performance, based on their distance from this mean.

4 One of the psychometric properties of the WKCE is that scores are vertically aligned in reading and math. This allows us to average student scores across grades.

5 We increased the cut off to 456 in order to create a slightly larger below average comparison group.

Table 3: K-8 School Rankings based on WKCE Reading Scale Scores

Performance Ranking	School Code Name	School Age	Religious?	WKCE Score	Total Students	Choice Students
Above Average	ES1	10-100 years	No	460-507	200-370	30-100%
	E4		Yes			
	ES2		Yes			
	E3		Yes			
	E2		Yes			
Below Average	E1	10-50 years	Yes	432-456	30-260	60-100%
	ES3		Yes			

NOTE: "E" means elementary schools; "ES" means elementary specialty.

The mean WKCE math scale score for grades 3-8 was 455, with a standard deviation of 61. The elementary/middle schools in our sample have been ranked in Table 4 (below) by math performance based on their distance from this mean.

Table 4: K-8 School Math Rankings based on WKCE Math Scale Scores

Performance Ranking	School Code Name	School Age	Religious?	WKCE Score	Total Students	Choice Students
Above Average	ES1	10-100 years	No	461-489	200-370	30-100%
	ES2		Yes			
	E4		Yes			
	E2		Yes			
	E3		Yes			
Below Average	E1	10-50 years	Yes	427-447	30-260	60-100%
	ES3		Yes			

NOTE: "E" means elementary schools; "ES" means elementary specialty.

Data Collection and Analysis

Depending on the size of the school, a team of two or three people on average visited each school. The visits included interviews with key stakeholders, teacher and student surveys, and observations of common areas. The interview guides and survey instruments were designed to capture basic information from several key stakeholder groups within each school, namely high school students, teachers, administrators holding key leadership roles, and guidance counselors. An example of our principal survey appears in Appendix A. For samples of our other data collection instruments, please see http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/SSV_appendix.pdf. When possible, parents, board members and other support personnel were also interviewed.

The various research instruments were designed to solicit information about teachers' and administrators' previous employment history; how long they have been affiliated with the school; their expectations for their students and the greatest challenges they face, and other factors that could be explored within a 20-30 minute interview. The questions were very consistent across all groups, with slight variations reflecting the specific relationship of the respondent to the school, and whether the visit involved a K-8 or high school. In addition, each team member documented informal observations of the school facilities and general conditions.

After the school visits, each research team organized their findings and prepared a summary. The authors examined the summaries with the goal of reporting findings and observations that were most frequently cited across all K-8 and high schools. We created "frequency charts" showing reported or observed practices, as well as the schools that demonstrated these practices in each of the six topic areas.

The following chapters set out the findings of the study by the main topic areas that we investigated:

1. School Culture, Climate and Community Building
2. Student Academic Success
3. Effective Leadership
4. Teacher Recruitment, Professional Development and Retention
5. Religion, Integration and Accommodation
6. Facilities and infrastructure

Within each topic area, key challenges faced and common practices used to address these challenges are highlighted. Each chapter concludes with a brief summary of the commonalities and differences between the above average and below average performers within the K-8 and high school sub-samples.

2. School Culture and Community Building

How do choice schools build culture and maintain a sense of community? We used personal interviews, surveys and observations to answer that question. Given the low income background of many choice families, we were particularly interested in learning about how schools might provide student and family support services to assist with both student academic and social support needs. During the interviews, we questioned school personnel about the common and unique challenges their schools face. Additionally, we attempted to explore the influence that choice students might have on school culture by observing student behavior and interactions in common areas. We were specifically interested in the similarities and differences between the elementary/middle and high schools in relation to culture and community building. In conducting the visits and analyzing the data gathered, we observed both explicit and less obvious ways that schools attempt to shape their culture and build strong communities.

Common Challenges

The common challenges most schools faced regarding culture and community building required addressing students' social as well as academic needs; engaging and fostering strong relationships with freshmen students; building rapport with the surrounding community; and acquiring the resources necessary to address non-academic matters.

Student Social Needs

Many students in the six high schools we visited strive and hope to be first generation college graduates. As a result they need a lot of technical and emotional support when applying to colleges. Even at the above average performing high schools, the majority of students' parents and families struggle to adequately prepare their children to attain the goals of high school graduation and college enrollment because they have not attained these goals themselves and may not have sufficient resources and time to assist their child.

> *"Many students are first generation college goers. They don't have direct access to or examples of family members who did, so this can be a disadvantage or hurdle they have to overcome."* [6]

For many of the most disadvantaged students in schools we visited, simply overcoming barriers that may prevent them from graduating high school will be a major achievement. Dealing with insufficient support from families, students' pressing financial needs, and gang and drug activity can redirect the focus of schools with large concentrations of disadvantaged students from purely academic preparation to administering primarily to students' social needs.

> *"Many of our children come to school with social challenges, and it is very difficult to measure success in academic terms. Coming to school on a consistent basis and engaging in the learning process is a huge sign of success for many of our students."* [7]

"Freshman Fade"

Staff at HS5 commented on the persistent challenge they face of engaging and connecting to what is estimated to be almost half of the freshman class in any given year, predominantly the black males in those classes. Higher proportions of these students leave HS5 after their first year for a combination of academic and behavioral reasons. Due to higher male attrition, the estimated female to male ratio in the senior class is 5:1. Student disconnection can be a result of a variety of factors, including poverty, poor academic preparation, lack of adult supervision, lack of mentors and community support, family responsibility including caring for siblings, and inconsistent living situations. When describing the social and family factors that serve as barriers to student success, one staff member at HS2 said:

> *"All across the board – Not having clean clothes; caring for siblings; having to have jobs; moving from place to place; lack of consistency. Some parents are proud their child wants to do better; others see it as arrogance being better than me."* [8]

6 HS5 Guidance Counselor Interview, Spring 2011.

7 HS1 School Leader Interview, Spring 2011.

8 HS2 Guidance Counselor Interview, Spring 2011.

Common Practices

Table 2.1: High School Culture and Community Building

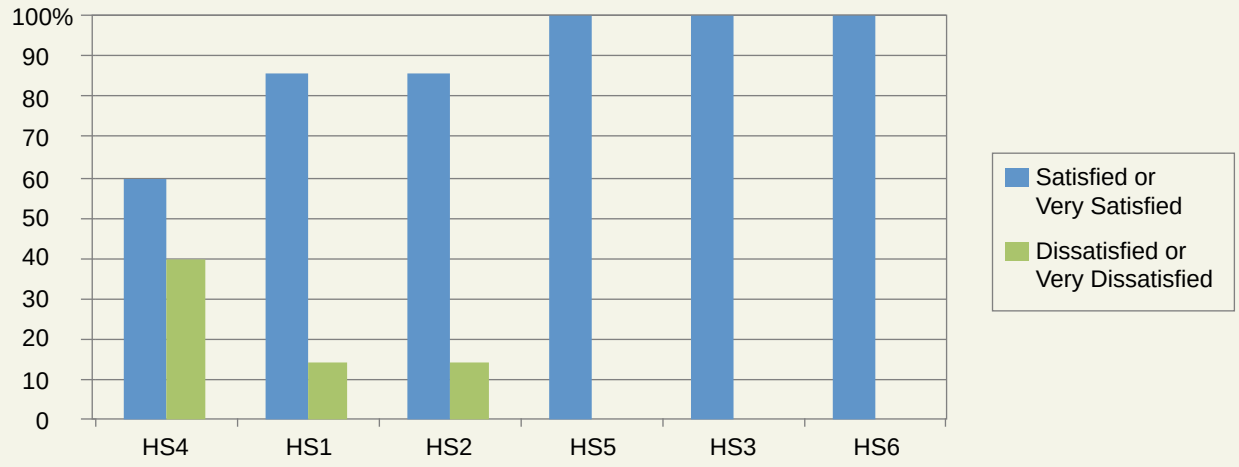
Common Practices	HS1	HS2	HS3	HS4	HS5	HS6
Encourages peer support or has formal mentoring systems in place	x	x		x		x
Single Guidance Counselor serves whole school	x	x				
Team of Guidance Counselors in place				x	x	x
Block scheduling	x	x		x	x	
Extensive academic support services (e.g. a learning center geared towards remediation)		x		x	x	x
>75% of students report feeling supported (n=455)*		x		x	x	x
>75% of students report that they enjoy going to school (n=456)*		x		x		x

Color-coding of schools refers to performance rankings defined in Tables 1 and 2. Green schools are above average in both math and reading; red schools are below average in both math and reading; the yellow school's performance is mixed (i.e. below average in math; above average in reading).

*Note: These data are based on student surveys administered during our site visits in May 2011.

Common practices observed at the high school level include establishing mentoring systems, block scheduling, and extensive academic support services (Table 2.1). At HS6, for example, juniors and seniors apply to be mentors to incoming freshmen through a competitive process. Formal mentoring systems of this type, or more informal peer support practices, were observed in four of the six high schools visited. Teachers spoke of the benefits of such systems in helping assimilate new students to the school in a positive, welcoming way. Similarly, when new teachers join HS6, they are partnered with senior teachers who act as mentors. Mentoring programs such as these contribute to a strong sense of community in a school, evidenced by survey results which indicate that the vast majority of teachers in our sample are satisfied with the sense of community in their school (Figure 2.1). Another common practice observed in HS2, HS5, and HS1 is block scheduling. This is a method of scheduling the school day in which each student has fewer classes overall but classes last for a longer period of time, typically up to 90 minutes per session. The intended result is to maximize available teaching time and foster a sense of community between students.

Figure 2.1: Teacher Satisfaction with Sense of Community at the High School Level [9]



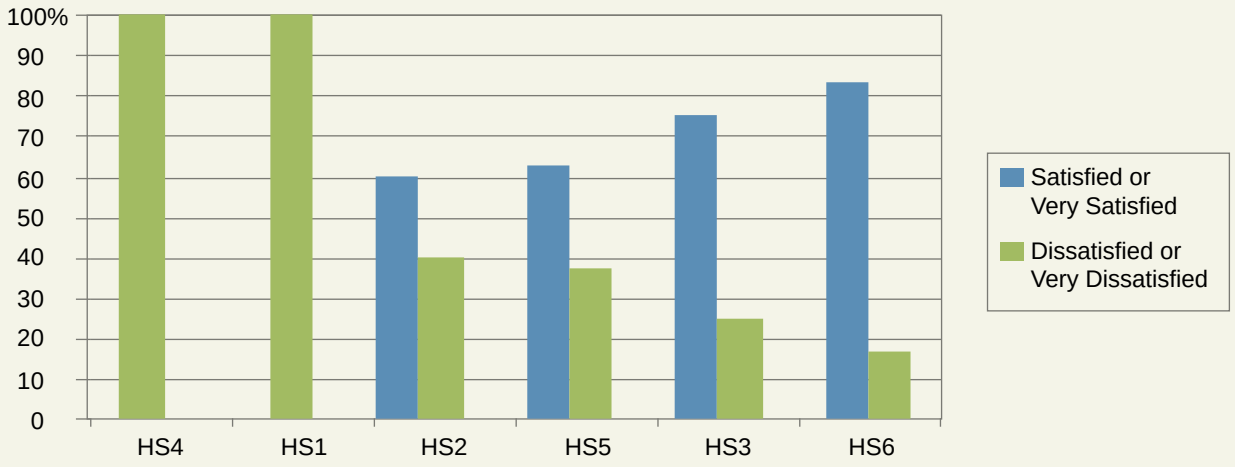
Highlighted Practice: Extensive Academic Support Services

The above average performing high schools have all invested in extensive academic support services for students. In four of the six high schools visited, the school representatives spoke of the types of support services they provide. At HS6, for example, a mastery learning approach to education ensures that students have demonstrated mastery of basic skills before being exposed to more advanced material. This starts with a "Prep School," held over a period of several weeks during the summer for incoming freshmen who may struggle academically once the school year begins. Once school is in regular session, struggling students who are a week or more behind in their work are immediately referred to counselors. Once a month, the school hosts "Help Day". On this day, students that are considered to be on track are excused from attending school, while the remaining students – approximately one third of the student body - attend school so that they can retake quizzes, finish incomplete homework, and make up work to fix a bad grade.

Another facet of the mastery learning approach used in this school is that teachers make themselves available for an extra half hour before and after school every other Thursday in order to work closely with struggling students. Progress reports are sent home every six weeks and an online grading system allows parents and students to monitor grades and assignments at all times. Interestingly, and perhaps providing evidence of the success of this approach, HS6 had the highest teacher satisfaction levels of all six schools in our sample relating to student completion of assigned homework (Figure 2.2).

9 We surveyed 37 high school teachers. Response rate = 100% as these surveys were conducted as part of the interviews. By school, the number of teachers is as follows: HS1 (n=7); HS2 (n=7); HS3 (n=4); HS4 (n=5); HS5 (n=8); HS6 (n=6).

Figure 2.2: Teacher Satisfaction with Student Completion of Assigned Homework at the High School Level



At the K-8 school level, common practices we observed include culture building activities, a focus on student social and emotional needs, and providing opportunities for parental involvement or support. Each school had its own approach to culture building. A major culture-building practice at ES1, for example, is looping. When students at ES1 enter first grade, they are assigned a classroom teacher that loops with them for the next eight years, through graduation. This practice allows teachers to learn the strengths and weaknesses of each student thoroughly as well as obviously having a detailed knowledge of what specific content the child learned in the previous grade. The "class teacher" is primarily responsible for delivering the bulk of the child's entire elementary education. This has a significant impact on school culture and climate. At ES1, there is a culture of mentoring and students are reminded that if one student is having trouble with a problem, another student is expected to explain to him how to answer it. In addition to informal mentoring practices such as these, there are formal mentoring systems in place. For example, first grade students have eighth grade "reading buddies" who read to them. These types of practices contribute to a strong community feeling in many of the K-8 schools we visited. For example, at

Engaging the Surrounding Community

At E1 and E2, which are two relatively newly established schools, administrators who were interviewed noted that one of the biggest challenges they face in building a rigorous, academic culture is engaging the surrounding community. Community support is critical when trying to instill or reinforce the significance of high achievement and college, while simultaneously helping students resist the temptation to leave the school because of the high academic standards. Teachers and administrators at E1 felt that holding information sessions for local community members, even those who do not have children enrolled at the school, might help address this challenge. School personnel at E2 have also begun to address this challenge by hiring two receptionists and a social worker who speak Spanish and can act as translators between teachers, other school staff and parents.

ES1 teachers speak of individual students in a way that suggests they view themselves as a sort of surrogate parent, though they also say that they work very closely with parents. As the Learning Support teacher put it:

> *"Because of the nature of the relationship between the class teacher and the student, this long-term eight-year relationship, there's really a good rapport that's built … the teacher can help to meet those needs in a special way, it's almost a parental relationship in a lot of ways, the student-teacher relationship."* [10]

Table 2.2: K-8 Culture and Community Building

Common Practices	E1	E2	E3	E4	ES1	ES2	ES3
Explicitly practices culture building activities				x	x		
Full time social worker		x					x
Part time social worker				x		x	
Encourages peer support or mentoring				x	x		
Focus on social and emotional needs of students	x	x	x		x		x
High levels of parent involvement or support				x	x	x	

Note: Color-coding of schools refers to performance rankings defined in Tables 3 and 4. Green schools are above average in both math and reading; red schools are below average in both math and reading

Highlighted Practice: Opportunities for Parent Involvement

E4, a faith-based elementary school in our sample, excels at providing opportunities for parents to get involved. During the visit, we noticed a lot of parents milling around and speaking with teachers, who told us that the parent attendance rate at parent teacher conferences is typically 100%:

> *"It's rare and shocking when somebody doesn't show up."* [11]

Our interviews with school staff revealed a wealth of opportunities for parents to get involved with school life, for example, by volunteering for lunchroom duty, supervising student clubs, assisting in the school library, helping to organize fundraisers such as the school auction, or serving on an advisory board known as the Education

10 ES1 Learning Support Teacher Interview, Fall 2011.

11 E4 Kindergarten Teacher Interview, Fall 2011.

Committee. Parent volunteer hours are incentivized but not required and two parent volunteers are randomly chosen to win a $10 gift card each month. These opportunities for parent involvement all contribute to the development of a strong school culture that fosters academic growth. Referencing the culture of achievement that has been established at E4, the principal said,

> *"As long as we get that parent involvement and kids are trying, we will catch them up. We'll create someone that can achieve and succeed in high school".* [12]

Summary

Some of the challenges we observed in relation to establishing a rigorous academic school culture were common across K-8 and high schools in our sample. Both the high schools and K-8 schools described a lack of basic skills, for example, as a major hurdle for many of their students to overcome. Challenges particular to high schools include resource constraints surrounding the provision of guidance counseling services, addressing student social needs, and preventing "freshman fade". The critical role of guidance counselors was highlighted again and again, as making an important contribution in various ways throughout a student's high school career. Challenges particular to K-8 schools include meeting students' academic needs and engaging the surrounding community.

In terms of common practices, at both schooling levels we observed student support or mentoring systems in place as strategies designed to assimilate new students and accommodate diversity among learners. At the high school level, those schools whose students performed above average on the math and reading WKCE all reported offering extensive academic support services to facilitate remediation where necessary. At the K-8 level, common practices reported by those schools whose students perform above average on the math and reading WKCE were strategies geared towards soliciting high levels of parental involvement in school life.

3. Student Academic Success

The college admissions process can be a very time and resource consuming experience. The application process can be particularly challenging for students whose families have limited means and exposure to friends and family members who have successfully transitioned from high school to post-secondary academic and career success.[13] School-based supports play a critical role in helping these students move on successfully from high school into post-secondary employment and education opportunities.[14] In the specific case of first generation,

12 E4 Principal Interview, Fall 2011.

13 Wimberly, G, L,, & Noeth, R, J, (2004), Schools involving parents in early postsecondary planning. Iowa City, IA: ACT Policy Research Center.

14 Stanton-Salazar, R, (1997), A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths. Harvard Educational Review, 67, 1 -40.

college-bound African-American students, researchers have found that high school guidance counselors play a crucial role by providing an array of social and academic supports to these students and their families.[15]

It is important to note that while most high school graduates go on to enroll in college, not all do.[16] College degrees are not necessary for many well-paying and productive careers such as construction trades, mechanics, and many governmental and social service jobs.[17] Yet researchers are quick to point out that simply graduating from high school does not prepare one adequately for such careers; students must graduate having mastered strong high school level skills such as math, reading and writing.[18] Non college-bound students are therefore likely to need just as much support and school resources as their college-bound peers, to help them successfully transition from high school into a career.

Common Challenges

Without exception, everyone we interviewed at MPCP schools placed a strong emphasis on encouraging students to consider and pursue post-secondary education. Among the most common challenges for the schools in our sample in this area were identifying successful strategies to strengthen students' academic foundation, overcoming problems related to family finances; preparing and motivating first generation college students; and managing discouraging peer pressure.

Strengthening Students' Academic Foundation

Interviews with teachers, students and administrators at several of the K-8 and high schools we visited revealed that many students arrive behind academically; in some cases by two or more grade levels in multiple subject areas. From the perspective of the teachers and administrators we spoke with at the K-8 schools, the challenge they face is giving all students a strong academic foundation and preparing them to gain entrance into one of the city's elite college prep high schools, most of which have very competitive entrance requirements.

At the high school level, interviews with teachers and administrators indicate that while significant investments are often made in accelerating student development, many students cannot close the gap, and this affects their college prospects. Some underperforming students do not score well enough on college entrance exams to be accepted into college. On the other hand, for some students who are accepted, their academic and social preparation has not adequately prepared them for college level coursework and other responsibilities. Many teachers at HS2 and HS1 reported that even if students are able to get into college, they are likely to need remediation once they get there.

15 Farmer-Hinton, R.L. & Adams, T.L. (2006), Social capital and college preparation: Exploring the role of counselors in a college prep school for black students. *Negro Educational Review*, 57, 101-116.

16 Teitelbaum, P., Kaufman, P. & Burns, S. (2002). Labor market outcomes of non-college bound high school graduates: Statistical analysis report (NCES Report No. 2002-126). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

17 Rosenbaum, J.E. (Spring, 2004),. All good jobs don't require a college degree. *American Educator*.

18 Murnane, R.J. & Levy, F. (1996). Teaching the new basic skills: Principals for educating children to thrive in a changing economy. New York: Free Press.

Preparing and Motivating First Generation College Students

Interviews with teachers and school administrators at high schools in our sample highlighted the fact that many of the students who work extremely hard to graduate from high school are the first person in their family to seriously consider enrolling in college. As a result, these students may lack the crucial support and encouragement necessary to complete the arduous entrance tests, applications, personal essays, school visits and placement exams. These challenges directly affect some students:

> *"Many students don't have anyone in their life who can model what it means to attend college, and their test scores are often so low that they become immediately discouraged and conclude college is not for them."* [19]

> *"Since many students don't have a family member that's ever attended college, it's so foreign to them. They don't know the process and many of them seem afraid to ask; they just assume it's just going to fall into place."* [20]

As a result of this reality, many students pursue "easy money" either through illicit activities or through some type of home-based job like hair styling. These alternatives are viewed by some students as more realistic than pursuing an uncertain and costly college education.

Interviews with teachers and administrators at the high schools highlighted an expectation that most students will attend college. The majority of those interviewed were college-preparatory focused, and less prepared to support students who are not interested in pursuing college after graduation. While the MPCP high schools that we visited reported very high graduation rates for their senior class ranging from 90 to 99%,[21] rates of 4- and 2-year college enrollment after graduation varied across the campuses, ranging from 65% to 90%.[22] This indicates that a substantial percentage of high school graduates do not go on to enroll in college. Schools face unique challenges with regards to non-college bound high school students.

19 Administrator at HS1, Spring 2011.

20 HS4 Guidance Counselor Interview, Spring 2011.

21 In most cases, this number refers to the percentage of seniors who graduate, not the percentage of 9th graders who will go on to graduate by 12th grade. When asked what percentage of entering freshman would likely graduate, this number often dropped to between 50-75% for many of the MPCP high schools we visited.

22 This number was based upon the percentage of seniors that graduate.

Environmental Influences

According to interviews with both teachers and administrators, some urban students face negative pressure from their neighborhood friends and others encouraging them to either drop out of high school or not to enroll in college after graduation. An administrator at HS3 explained how peer pressure influences some students:

> *"Our students wear small, draw-string backpacks so they can hide them under their jackets when they're walking through their neighborhood. They don't want anyone to know they go to school."* [23]

One teacher at HS3 indicated that his non-college bound students feared that enrolling in college would make them appear "soft". The students believed that what makes them smart and able to survive in their communities is their street wisdom and ability to manage the influences around them. For many of these students, they fear that college will dilute their "street smarts", therefore preventing them from being able to survive and thrive in their community after college.

Common Practices at the High School Level

College-Bound Students

When examining interview data collected during the site visits, several reoccurring practices were identified among the schools with the highest college enrollment rates. These include creating a college preparatory atmosphere, ensuring early and frequent interaction with the school guidance department, and providing specific college preparatory services such as on–site ACT testing, organizing visits from college recruiters to campus, and taking students to tour college campuses.

Table 3.1: Post-Secondary Preparation and Student Academic Success

Common Practices - College-Bound Students	HS1	HS2	HS3	HS4	HS5	HS6
A college prep atmosphere (eg. displaying acceptance letters)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Early and frequent interaction with school guidance department		x		x	x	x
Specific college preparatory services (eg. ACT prep, organization of college tours)	x	x	x	x	x	x

Note: Color-coding of schools refers to performance rankings defined in Tables 1 and 2. Green schools are above average in both math and reading; red schools are below average in both math and reading; the yellow school's performance is mixed (i.e. below average in math; above average in reading).

23 HS3 Teacher Interview, Spring 2011.

All the high schools attempt to maintain a college preparatory atmosphere and provide specific college prep services. All the above average and one below average school place a strong emphasis on early and frequent interaction with guidance counselors. For example, as soon as students arrive on campus at HS4 in their freshman year, they are given a great deal of support by the guidance department regarding their post-secondary options. Entering freshman complete an interest inventory, followed by an occupations assessment, to help students begin to look a possible career options. During their freshman and sophomore years, the guidance department also utilizes the WISCareers website. This website allows students to identify potential career opportunities and provides information on all the colleges in the state that have related programs. WISCareers also provides information on which high school courses students must take to be adequately prepared for college level courses in their fields of interests. One guidance counselor at HS4 emphasized the importance of talking to students from the moment they arrive in ninth grade about their life plans after graduation:

> *"That's why they have to start in their freshman year, to think, 'can I handle these classes. If I want to get into med, do I like sciences, do I like math?' So we have them thinking about this right away."* [24]

This high level of support from the guidance department continues as students progress through high school. During their junior year, students meet in small groups with counselors to discuss college options and learn about the difference between community colleges and four-year institutions, and the admissions requirements associated with each of them. Seniors are met with one-on-one to determine which post-graduation options are most important to them; what gaps they need to fill; what assistance they might need filling out applications and financial aid forms; whether help is needed requesting transcripts, etc. Most local colleges and universities send recruiters to the school to meet with seniors. The guidance department organizes the recruiter visits and helps students prepare for these meetings.

Highlighted Practice: A College Prep Atmosphere

One common practice among the schools with high college enrollment rates was a system of supports geared specifically toward the college application process. Given that many families struggle to adequately prepare their children for graduation and college enrollment, teachers and administrators at many of the high schools we visited actively step in to fill the gap.

Interviews, teacher surveys and observational data collected at HS5 showed that college attendance is being promoted in every aspect of the school. This school incorporates block scheduling for essential subjects to prepare students for college scheduling and to allow for more in-depth instruction. The school also offers a formal ACT prep course, though it is not mandatory. ACT prep at HS5 extends into the classroom where teachers include critical thinking practice questions on unit tests. Additionally, the school provides fee waivers for two college entrance tests and provides student transportation to one test. Recently, HS5 became a testing

24 HS4 Guidance Counselor Interview, Spring 2011.

site for the ACT. Lastly, understanding that many students face financial hurdles that might prevent them from applying to and attending college, teachers and counselors at HS5 help students complete the Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms and apply for a variety of scholarships. This school's senior class of 2010-11 received over $2 million in scholarship applications.

Researchers at both HS2 and HS1 observed walls near the entrance of the school that displayed seniors' college acceptance letters, signaling the importance of college attendance for all. In fact HS3's mission is centered on preparing students for college and it is a requirement that students apply to at least six post-secondary institutions and be accepted to at least one college in order to graduate. Promotion of college culture is furthered by a rigorous academic culture, extensive academic support services, and a constant focus on college preparation by teachers and staff. HS2 organizes ACT preparation for juniors; fee waivers and transportation to two ACT tests (in both junior and senior years), and classes on the importance of college and college life, majors and career opportunities. In the first semester of their senior year, students take a class focused specifically on the college application process and applying for financial aid. Additionally, college recruiters visit the school at various stages throughout the year, seniors take day trips to colleges in neighboring states, and juniors take a 10-day college tour to historically black colleges in the South accompanied by school staff and teachers.

> *"We just really push college, we don't stop talking about it, we don't stop telling them this is what you have to do….everything you say, everything you do, you just use the word college, university, prepare, ACT, college, university".* [25]

Non College-Bound Students

For students who may not pursue college directly after graduation, there are notable programs and practices that several schools mentioned that could help these students. Among the common practices in this area are career nights, teaching life skills, and encouraging the use of online, career-oriented websites. Career night provides an opportunity for students to have one-on-one interactions with people currently practicing in fields that may be of interest to them. Each January, the above average HS4 hosts a "Career Night" when as many as fifty different community members from different vocations come to discuss their jobs. These might range, for example, from cosmetology, to wood working, to engineering. Another school, HS3, does something similar by bringing in professionals, such as firefighters, to discuss non-college career options with students. Another practice we observed that has only been implemented by one school in our sample thus far is the use of online resources. WISCareers is an interactive career exploration and planning website which can be used by non-college bound high school students to help make connections between their aptitudes and interests and future career choices. Through WISCareers, high school students can take interest assessments, skills assessments, and value assessments to help them narrow down career choices to which they might be a good fit. The website also provides assistance with resume and cover letter writing, job interview guidance, and lists current job openings in Wisconsin and around the nation.

25 HS2 Teacher Interview, Spring 2011.

Highlighted Practice: Life Skills Training

With the understanding that half or fewer of his students would enroll in college after graduation, a teacher at HS3 discussed in detail the importance of providing his students with life skills, which will prepare them for life after high school. These practical skills vary from specific training in trades to financial literacy. As a math teacher, he had extended his curriculum to include information about home loans and how to manage a household budget.

When asked about career guidance services provided by their school in the student survey, most high school students reported that they were neutral, satisfied or very satisfied with these. Specifically, students were asked to rate the following career guidance services they had received at their school, and the results are shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Student Satisfaction with Career Guidance Services

Student Support Service	Satisfied or Very Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied or Very Dissatisfied	Does Not Apply	N
Advisement on career options and goals	64%	25%	6%	5%	458
Information on job training programs	34%	34%	15%	18%	458
Resume writing and job interview techniques	38%	28%	19%	15%	458
Information on applying to the various branches of the military	32%	27%	14%	28%	457

Source: Student surveys administered during site visits

Common Practices at K-8 Level

All the K-8 schools expressed a commitment to helping their students reach high levels of student achievement, and they used a variety of strategies to accomplish this goal. The common practices at this level (see Table 3.3) include a strong focus on promoting academic excellence in all communications with students and encouraging and creating opportunities for parental involvement in student learning. At ES1, for example, each eighth grader builds a drum to play at a graduation attended by parents and families. Twenty logs are delivered to the school basement in preparation for this and students spend several hours each week carving out the logs and then stretching animal hide across them to construct the drums that they will play for their parents and families at

the ceremony. Parents at this above average K-8 school seemed in tune with the school curriculum and satisfied with student learning:

> *"The way they present the learning brings the students in so many different ways. For instance when they were studying the Greeks I remember my son coming home and saying they were learning about the discus, and I asked him if he could throw it and he said, 'Yeah, do you know how heavy it is?' And I thought, no, I don't have that knowledge in my experience set. Yet he knew the weight of it and it was a more complete experience for him."* [26]

Interviews conducted while visiting ES1 also highlighted this school's unique approach to working with students who may not be college bound. Teachers and administrators at this K-8 school are confident that, after completing 8th grade, their students will have practical skills such as woodworking, drafting, pottery, knitting, and sewing that could help them in craft and technical careers after graduation. A parent interviewed at this school, which limits student exposure to technology, emphasized how the skills the school focuses on can be translated to other facets of the student's life as her son recently experienced after transitioning to a high school with technology:

> *"Initially he said, 'Oh my gosh I don't know how to do the Excel spread sheets for my biology reports and the other kids know that' but he learned and eventually got an internship at a computer company and now he's called 'the tech kid' at his school…Whatever they haven't learned here they should be able to pick up."* [27]

Most of the K-8 schools measure their success by the specific high schools their students attend after graduation.

26 ES1 Parent Interview, Fall 2001.

27 ES1 Parent Interview, Fall 2011.

Table 3.3: K-8 Student Academic Success

Common Practices	E1	E2	E3	E4	ES1	ES2	ES3
Strong focus on academic excellence/preparation for high school and college	x	x		x		x	
Title 1 resources	x		x	x		x	
Extensive academic support services	x	x		x	x	x	x
Encouraging/providing opportunities for parent involvement [in school activities]		x		x	x	x	x
Clear feeder into specific high schools	x			x		x	

Note: Color-coding of schools refers to performance rankings defined in Tables 3 and 4. Green schools are above average in both math and reading; red schools are below average in both math and reading.

Highlighted Practice: Preparing Students to Feed into Specific High Schools

Many of the K-8 schools we visited explicitly promote future college enrollment for all of their students. At E1, teachers and administrators begin talking to students about college as early as kindergarten. At E4, teachers and administrators approach future college enrollment for their students with the understanding that a crucial step toward this goal is entrance into a successful college-prep high school. One of the ways E1 and E4 promote college enrollment is by encouraging students to enroll in particular college-prep high schools as indicated by the following interview quotes:

> *"Nearly all our students pursue high schools with a college prep program, and they select high schools based on their academic merit versus if it is a cool place to go to. Most of our students go on to Rufus King, Dominican, Milwaukee Lutheran, Wisconsin Lutheran, Messmer, and other high performing Christian high schools."*[28]

> *"Our goal here is to prepare our students in middle school for high school…. At least 85% of our graduates go on to Catholic high school."* [29]

28 E1 Administrator Interview, Fall 2011.

29 E4 Teacher Interview, Fall 2011.

SUMMARY

Across most of the K-8 and high schools we visited, several common challenges were observed. Interviews with representatives at both schooling levels revealed that many students arrive on campus below grade level. At the K-8 level, teachers and administrators voiced concerns regarding how this would affect their students' chances of getting accepted into one of the city's elite college-prep high schools. At the high school level, this challenge plays a significant role in graduation rates, as well as how many students will pursue college and be sufficiently prepared for college level course work. One challenge for high schools that have an intense focus on college preparation concerns how to best serve students who are not interested in pursuing college.

There were several common practices observed at both the K-8 and high school levels that are intended to help promote academic success. Schools at both schooling levels worked hard to establish a strong system of supports for students, whether through establishing a college preparation environment or providing students with a guidance department or guidance counsellor. At four of the five above-average K-8 schools, teachers, administrators and other interviewees described the broad range of academic support services on offer. Similarly, three of the five above average K-8 schools described their school's strong focus on academic excellence and an emphasis on preparing students for high schools and college.

4. Effective Leadership

Effective leadership has an impact on the overall quality of teaching and learning at a school. This is particularly true in schools serving high needs populations.[30] School leadership plays a critical role in the retention of good teachers, in attracting high quality candidates for teaching posts, and in developing the aptitudes and skills of existing teachers. In order to assess the effectiveness of leaders and leadership teams associated with the choice schools in our sample, we interviewed key administrators, teachers, students and other members of the school community. We compiled information on relevant experience of school leaders prior to their current roles. We also noted previous accomplishments of school leaders and observed which specific leadership or organizational models were most common in the schools. In particular, we were interested in capturing how schools recruit, train and retain leaders, and in pinpointing the leadership characteristics that might be correlated with school performance.

Common Challenges

The challenges we observed were common across both schooling levels and relate to recruiting effective leaders and dealing with inexperienced leadership.

30 Branch, Gregory F., Eric A. Hanushek, and Steven G. Rivkin. 2009. Estimating Principal Effectiveness. CALDER Working Paper 32. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

Recruiting Effective Leaders

Recruiting effective leaders who match the specific needs of a school was a common challenge faced by most schools in our sample. At a relatively new school like HS1, this means attracting and developing a principal and administrative team that can establish personal relationships with students and teachers, while simultaneously maintaining an intense academic focus. The pool of experienced school administrators is quite limited in general, but advanced schools have a sound and demonstrated reputation that enables them to draw on a well-qualified pool of experienced teachers, administrators and alumni with proven track records in business, higher education and other reputable industries. School administrators at two of the larger faith-based schools in our sample were recruited from similar faith-based schools in close geographical proximity.

Inexperienced Leadership

Some schools face the challenge of inexperienced leadership, whether recruited from outside the school or in the form of an internal staff member groomed over time to assume a leadership role. HS1, for example, features a three-person leadership team, all of which are in their first year in these roles:

- The Principal acts as the instructional leader, managing teachers and all student academic matters.
- The Vice Principal of Administration oversees all administrative and day-to-day operations.
- The Dean of Student Affairs manages all discipline and social issues, including engaging parents about these matters.

With the exception of the principal, no member of HS1's leadership team has prior experience with the responsibilities associated with his or her new role. However, they appear to respect and support one another, and they are committed to "turning the school around." Transitioning into an academically rigorous school from the top-down appears to be their greatest challenge. It appears that this will require professional development for all members of the leadership team and possibly the recruitment of more experienced leaders.

Common Practices

Table 4.1: High School Effective Leadership

Common Practices	HS1	HS2	HS3	HS4	HS5	HS6
Leadership team model	x			x	x	x
One, dynamic, central leader		x	x			
Experienced administrators that have worked with the school for over a decade		x	x	x	x	x
Effective relationship with teachers				x	x	x
A leadership pipeline exists within the school				x	x	x
>50% of students report that school principal knows their family well (n=454)*		x	x			

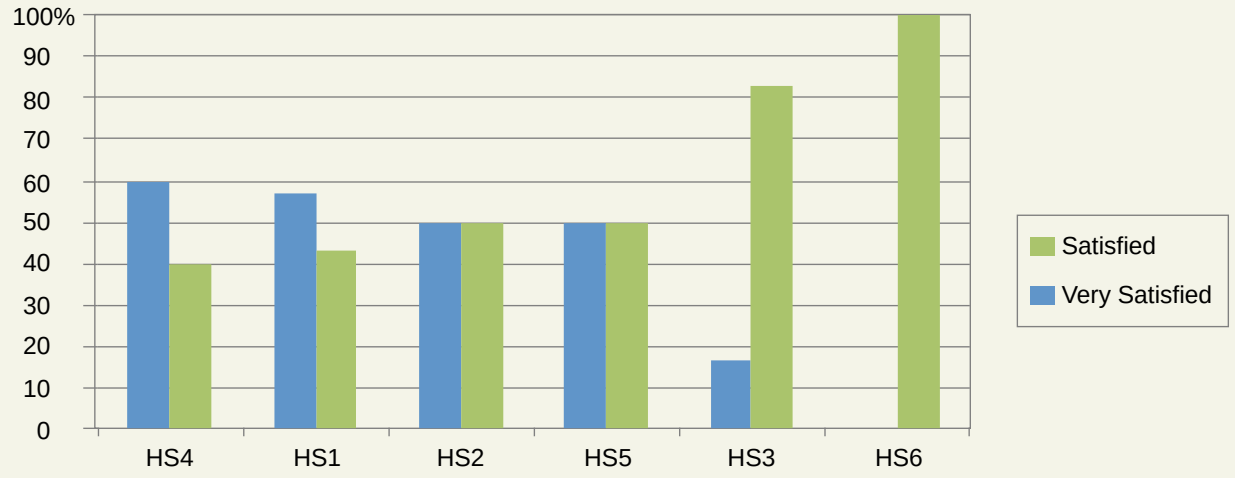
Color-coding of schools refers to performance rankings defined in Tables 1 and 2. Green schools are above average in both math and reading; red schools are below average in both math and reading; the yellow school's performance is mixed (i.e. below average in math; above average in reading).

*Note: This information comes from student surveys administered during site visits.

Common practices observed at the high school level (see Table 4.1) include promoting retention of experienced administrators, creating a leadership pipeline, and developing a leadership team model. Long-term administrators that have served with a school for more than a decade have the advantage of familiarity with school procedures under a variety of circumstances and are typically very knowledgeable about school history. These individuals seem to play a crucial role in maintaining school stability and preserving important traditions as a school evolves. HS5 has a very stable and experienced leadership team consisting of a president (26 years' experience), principal (14 years' experience), and vice principal for administration (10 years' experience). In schools where it is not possible or desirable to bring in experienced outsiders to lead the school, existing staff members may assume a new role and responsibilities in response to a perceived need. Identifying these staff members in advance and allowing them to learn the duties and responsibilities associated with their role before assuming it can be a valuable exercise, when circumstances permit. At both HS6 and HS4, many of the administrators interviewed indicated that they knew more than six months in advance, and in one case 4-5 years in advance, what their new role in the school would be in upcoming academic years. This gave them the opportunity to work with and learn from the person who currently holds that role.

In general, teacher satisfaction with the support of administrators at their schools, as reported in our surveys, was high. At all six schools, every teacher surveyed indicated they were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the level of support from administrators at their school (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Teacher Satisfaction with the Support of Administrators at the High School Level



Highlighted Practice: Leadership Team Model

The three oldest and largest high schools in our study exemplify the leadership team model, with teams comprised of experienced individuals who have typically been serving in their current roles for more than ten years. These teams divide the tasks associated with running a school among team members, assigning roles based on expertise or experience. At HS4, for example, a superintendent acts as C.E.O., supervising mission advancement, recruitment and overseeing the business office of the school. This frees up the principal to concentrate on supervising curriculum and instruction. The superintendent at this school has held his role for 18

years and brought significant experience to the role with him. His replacement will be a member of the school's existing administrative team. Additionally, a Board of Directors oversees school operations and identifies future challenges that will need to be addressed such as maintaining and expanding school facilities and setting the direction for future school growth. Similarly, at HS6 a Director of Curriculum and Instruction, a Director of Guidance and a Dean of Students assist the principal. The youngest high school in our sample, HS1, has entered a transitional phase in its development and is working hard to develop an effective leadership team that will guide the school into the next stage of its development.

Table 4.2: K-8 Effective Leadership

Common Practices	E1	E2	E3	E4	ES1	ES2	ES3
Leadership team model		x			x	x	
Dynamic or single leader model	x		x	x			x
Experienced administrators		x	x	x	x	x	x
Effective relationship with teachers				x	x		

Note: Color-coding of schools refers to performance rankings defined in Tables 3 and 4. Green schools are above average in both math and reading; red schools are below average in both math and reading.

Common practices observed at the K-8 level include cultivating effective relationships with teachers and recruiting a dynamic central leader. At ES1, the principal has developed an effective relationship with her teachers, built around mutual trust. In this particular case, the leadership model is very hands-off, allowing teachers to operate with great autonomy. Although all school personnel describe themselves as part of a team, administrators have granted teachers full authority over their own classrooms. Teachers at this school have great independence in deciding what their students need, based on their knowledge of the students, the theory of child development that the school subscribes to, and consultation with parents. The principal recognizes the critical role of her teachers in advocating for the developmental needs of the children in their classrooms, and her comments reflect the authority granted to teachers as a result:

> *"My title is administrator. I am not the boss of the teachers. I work in colleagueship with them but I am not the person who can say 'you must do this and you can't see that'… My style personally is more of team."* [31]

31 ES1 Principal Interview, Fall 2011.

Highlighted Practice: A Dynamic, Central Leader

Resource constraints present a challenge for smaller schools that would like to implement a team approach to leadership but cannot. A number of schools, such as ES3, E4, and E3, addressed this challenge by selecting one dynamic leader to be at the center of school governance. For example, in a typical school day, the principal at E4 performs a multitude of roles, from proctoring tests to patrolling hallways, to conducting individual conferences with teachers. Several of the teachers interviewed cited his strong leadership as the central reason that would encourage them to stay at this school instead of seeking a school with a higher salary.

> *"[The principal] is very supportive. It's great to have good administrators."* [32]

When describing his role, the school leader said he visits their classrooms daily without making them feel like he is micromanaging; he encourages communication between teachers and parents as the first step in conflict resolution; and encourages teachers to be creative and try new things. Teachers particularly valued his open-door policy, saying,

> *"He's always available to listen."*[33]

Summary

Two common challenges relating to effective leadership emerged at both schooling levels, regardless of performance: recruiting effective school leaders and dealing with inexperienced leadership. Recruitment of leaders is a common challenge for the faith-based schools in particular because they ideally seek someone who has school management experience, but who also shares the school's faith. Inexperienced leadership was a particular challenge at the high school level where a number of the administrators are new to their roles.

An innovative strategy used by all of the above average high schools involves the development of a leadership pipeline within the school. Similarly, the majority of above average high schools and K-8 schools in our sample take advantage of leadership teams to share the administrative, financial, academic, and, in some cases, religious responsibilities associated with running a school. In schools that are too small to support a leadership team, we observed dynamic principals who juggled these responsibilities effectively. Common practices among all above-average K-8 schools include proactive efforts to attract and keep experienced school leaders.

32 ES4 Teacher Interview, Fall 2011.

33 ES4 Teacher Interview, Fall 2011.

5. Quality Teachers

Teacher quality is one of the most frequently cited influences on student and school performance; however, recruiting, training and retaining quality teachers is a major undertaking for the majority of schools. Several factors can influence the success schools experience in one or more of these three areas. In this section, we take a closer look at the factors that contribute to a school's success with building and maintaining a strong faculty. Most of our insights were gained from direct conversations with teachers, teacher surveys, and interviews with the school leaders and other stakeholders.

Common Challenges

Identifying Qualified Teachers

There appears to be a very limited supply of experienced certified teachers, particularly males, in the Milwaukee area. Identifying high quality, certified teacher candidates is a challenge for the majority of the schools. For many choice schools, "non-certified" yet well-educated teachers are the largest pool from which to identify candidates. However, certified experienced teachers are most desired and very difficult to find. This problem is exacerbated when there is also a requirement for teachers to share the religious faith of the school or at least to respect and understand this, or to be trained in a particular theory of or approach to child development and education. Not all of the choice schools in our sample face difficulties in recruiting staff. For example, the principal of one of the religious K-8 schools reported receiving more than 100 applications for teaching positions advertised before the start of the current school year.

The majority of schools, however, must rely on recent graduates of reliable teacher training and degree granting programs to grow and sustain their programs, and they must make significant investments in providing their new hires with support in curricula and pedagogy, classroom management and other aspects of teaching in a religious and urban environment. Schools that provide teachers strong administrative support and adequate professional development are more likely to retain teachers than schools that do not.

For some of the K-8 and high schools we visited, the religious traditions are so intertwined in the curriculum and daily practices that the school's administrators have developed policies which dictate that certain positions, if not all, must be filled by individuals that belong to the same religious faith as that of the school. Interviews with school administrators at several large, well-established schools indicate that the pool of teacher candidates is so vast that this does not limit potential candidates. However, administrators at smaller schools, or schools that are grounded in very distinct religious traditions, face the challenge of finding well-qualified individuals who share the religious beliefs of their campus. One K-8 school administrator expressed how this challenge has affected his ability to hire religion instructors:

> *"It is very difficult to recruit religion instructors because (in this particular faith) they have master degrees and are looking for full-time employment. We can only offer them part-time work."* [34]

34 ES2 Administrator Interview, Fall 2011.

Supporting New and Inexperienced Teachers

Once teachers are hired, they must be quickly acclimated to the school's culture, which is strongly influenced by the religious focus, demographic make-up of the student body, and resources available to the school. The young and less experienced teachers can find themselves employed by new and transitional schools that do not have the administrative capacity and other resources necessary to provide them the support and guidance they need to grow and succeed. On the other hand, some administrators discussed the challenges of supporting young inexperienced teachers who may not be familiar with urban culture and lack the experience necessary to manage students at varying levels of social and academic development. For young teachers new to schools with disproportionate numbers of under-performing students, a teacher's roles and responsibilities may seem more like those of a social worker, counselor or "cheerleader."

Common Practices Among High Schools

Administrators at most of the older schools reported high levels of teacher retention, and this affords them the capacity to be very selective about the new teachers they recruit and hire. One school does not post teacher vacancies but hires "for mission" exclusively within its religious network. This school also has a well-organized structure and process for inducting new teachers. For example, all teachers complete a "Professional Planner" that sets goals for each year in the areas of spiritual growth, content knowledge, and technology utilization. Departmental Chairs and the Principal review these Planners. Each summer the school runs a four-day institute for the faculty on special topics in education, such as brain research. The school also subsidizes the professional development activities of teachers in the core academic subjects.

Administrators across most of the high schools reported that they haven't been able to retain good teachers by relying on competitive salaries or other financial incentives. One of the most effective sources of teacher recruitment and retention appears to be associated with the strength of the religious culture of the school. Teachers interviewed at one of the advanced schools repeatedly noted that the school's grounding in their religious faith provides them with a strong sense of community.

Representatives of the newer schools were more likely to reference or offer tangible examples of common practices that have consistently yielded positive outcomes regarding teacher recruitment and retention compared to the new and transitional schools. The common practices highlighted in Table 5.1 vary significantly depending on the stage of a school's evolution.

Table 5.1: High School Teacher Quality

Common Practices	HS1	HS2	HS3	HS4	HS5	HS6
Uses a traditional approach to recruiting teachers- public advertisements, notices, etc.	x	x	x		x	
Partners with teacher training or degree granting organizations				x		x
Leadership continuity and stability		x	x	x	x	x
Administrative guidance and support for teachers	x	x	x	x	x	x
Low levels of teacher turnover				x	x	x
Clear majority of teachers report satisfaction with the school	x	x	x	x	x	x
Supports for new and inexperienced teachers		x	x	x		x

Note: Color-coding of schools refers to performance rankings defined in Tables 1 and 2. Green schools are above average in both math and reading. red schools are below average in both math and reading; the yellow school's performance is mixed (i.e. below average in math; above average in reading).

Partnering with Teacher Training and Degree Granting Organizations

Four out of the six high schools in our sample reported that they have formed partnerships with teacher training or degree granting programs like Teach for America and various teacher colleges in and around Milwaukee. In one of the new schools, a formerly weak academic culture has been significantly improved by the recruitment of a whole new team of school leaders and certified teachers. Several of the K-8 schools we visited also reported having formed close links with a handful of specific colleges, particularly religious colleges within the same faith as the school, which were used for the recruitment of graduates. In two of the faith-based K-8 schools, it was noted that their teaching vacancies are not widely advertised; instead, advertisements are posted in outlets such as diocesan newsletters or websites in order to attract teachers with a commitment to their faith.

Stability as a Key to Teacher Retention and Student Success

We found that three high performing high schools were maintaining considerable leadership continuity. Many of the teachers and administrators have worked at the school for 15 years or more, and many students have parents, grandparents and teachers who also attended the school. Similarly, one of the longer-established faith-based K-8 schools was found to have a very low rate of teacher turnover, which was attributed by teachers and administrators alike to the strong sense of community and the school's holistic approach to child development, as well as its high academic standards. It was clear that these factors had outweighed the financial incentives of working in this school, since salaries were lower than teachers could achieve elsewhere. In a specialist K-8 school which follows a particular philosophy of education, there was an underlying understanding – linked to this philosophy – that newly recruited teachers would be committed to spending at least eight years in the school, in order to bring a cohort of students to graduation. Most of the teachers in this school were already in their second eight-year cycle.

Common Practices Among K-8 Schools

The K-8 schools demonstrated a variety of common practices. Table 5.2 describes a range of practices that are used to recruit, train and retain teachers. It also notes an important finding from the teacher survey regarding satisfaction. The more successful schools have established relationships with teacher training or degree granting programs, compared to the less successful schools that rely on traditional and relatively ineffective teacher recruitment strategies. Higher levels of teacher retention and satisfaction are two other characteristics that distinguish successful from less successful schools in this area.

Table 5.2: K-8 Teacher Quality

Common Practices	E1	E2	E3	E4	ES1	ES2	ES3
Uses a traditional approach to recruiting teachers - public advertisements, notices, etc.	x						
Partnership with teacher training or degree granting organizations	x	x			x	x	
Clearly defined teacher professional development process					x		
Successful retention of the majority of teachers (five years or more)				x	x	x	
Vast majority of teachers report satisfaction with the school	x			x		x	

Note: Color-coding of schools refers to performance rankings defined in Tables 3 and 4. Green schools are above average in both math and reading; red schools are below average in both math and reading.

Highlighted Practice: Supporting New and Inexperienced Teachers

Freshman teachers at one new high school reported that, in the absence of other resources they would like but the school cannot afford, meeting once a month to discuss successful teaching strategies that could be used to help "struggling students" was very helpful and empowering. At this school, in-service training had been found to be most effective when teachers were allowed to propose the topics they believe are most important. One of the longer-established faith-based religious schools exhibited a range of common practices in supporting new as well as longer-established teachers. In this school, teachers have been given control over their own professional development and a high level of empowerment in shaping school culture. A mentoring system has been adopted in which new teachers are paired with more experienced teachers, and a teacher recognition system has been established including an annual awards ceremony. These measures are highly valued by the teachers at this school, as reflected in one of our interviews:

> *"This is the first school I have been associated with where teachers play a huge role socially and academically."* [35]

35 E1Teacher Interview, Fall 2011.

Summary

For the majority of schools at both the K-8 and high school levels, the recruitment and retention of teachers is a major challenge, especially when schools wish to appoint teachers who share their religious faith or philosophy about student development. However, there were a small number of schools in our sample in which teacher recruitment is not a problem and turnover is consistently very low. In general, these are long-established schools that have been successful in achieving high standards of performance and building a strong school community; these factors were found to be more important than financial incentives in recruitment and retention.

Above average performing high schools that face recruitment challenges are addressing these in a variety of ways, most commonly by developing close links with specific teacher training colleges or degree-awarding institutions within their faith-based community, or by using targeted advertising of teacher vacancies on specific websites or diocesan newsletters. A supportive environment for teachers was found to be just as important as formal professional development opportunities, especially in the context of low resources, in contributing to teacher satisfaction and low turnover. Common practices at the high and K-8 school levels included mentoring schemes, the use of professional development plans and annual teacher awards.

All of the schools reported that they provide teacher professional development; however, teachers and administrators at the above average performing schools were more likely to describe structured and well-organized teacher professional development activities. These schools often view teacher professional development as an extension of their mission and part of a leadership preparation process. Many of the teachers affiliated with smaller schools described very flexible and less focused teacher professional development opportunities. Levels of resource availability and resource commitment for teacher recruitment and retention appear to best explain the differences between these schools.

6. Religion and Student Integration

Though academic performance is generally the number one factor influencing school selection by parents, religion comes a close second among parents with children attending private schools.[36] Previous research examining the main factors influencing parents' selection of private schools consistently notes the importance of religion. However, most religious schools report that some students do not take religion courses nor do they participate in other religious activities provided by the school. It appears that many parents view religious

36 Convey, J. J. (1986, April). "Parental choice of Catholic schools as a function of religion, race, and family income". Paper presented at the annual meeting of the *American Educational Research Association*, San Francisco, CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 269 542); Gratiot, M. H. (1980). "Why parents choose nonpublic schools: Comparative attitudes and characteristics of public and private school consumers", *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 40, 4825-A. (University Microfilms No. 8006315); and Nelson, K. O. (1988, November). "Reasons given by Anglo/Hispanic parents/ guardians for choosing a Catholic high school in the Southwestern United States", *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 49, 1049-A. (University Microfilms No. 8814262.

education as a proxy for other key characteristics they find desirable in a school.[37] For such families, the faith-based traditions and practices of a school play less of a critical role in the school selection process than the perceived discipline and safety that they associate with religious schools.[38]

The proportion of religious schools in our sample is unsurprising considering the proportion of religious schools in the MPCP generally. Table 6.1 presents descriptive statistics of the religious identification of MPCP schools in school year 2010-11. Eighty-six percent of participating schools were religious and a further seven percent were non-religious but with a religious tradition. Only eight percent of private schools participating in the MPCP in 2010-11 were non-religious with a secular tradition.

Table 6.1: Religious Identification of MPCP Schools 2010-11

Religious Identification of Schools	Total	Percent of Participating Schools	Percent of MPCP Students Attending
Religious	90	85.7	84.2
Non-Religious (with a religious tradition)	7	6.7	6.7
Non-Religious (secular)	8	7.6	9.2

Source: Data from 2010-11 Principals' Survey

Notes: Valid N= 105. Source: Information concerning religious identification and affiliation was taken from the 206-07, 2007-08, 2008-09, and 2010-2011 SCDP principals' surveys. Subsequent data came from the Public Policy Form. Total MPCP enrollment for the 105 schools that had religiosity identified is 20,918. MPCP enrollment data is from DPI's unaudited list.

During the school visits, we attempted to better understand how the choice program has influenced the religious orientation of the schools that emphasize particular religious practices and traditions as part of their school day. We did this both through interviews with teachers and administrators as well as through a teacher survey that, in part, focused on the religious identity of schools and how that has been impacted over time by participation in the MPCP.

Common Challenges

Integrating and Accommodating All Students

Given current policies allowing choice students to opt out of religious activities at MPCP schools, how might this impact the culture and identity of these schools? Several of the principals we interviewed stated that participation in the Program has over time dramatically changed the demographic composition of their student

37 Trivitt, J. and P. J. Wolf (2011). "School Choice and the Branding of Catholic Schools," *Education Finance and Policy*, 6:2, pp. 202-245.

38 Stewart, et al. (2010). Family voices on parental school choice in Milwaukee: What can we learn from low-income families? (Report No. 19, p. 11). School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas. Available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_19.pdf.

body. For instance, teachers and school leaders that once taught mainly middle class suburban students now find themselves also serving relatively large numbers of low income inner-city students.

The change in student demographics has brought with it challenges and opportunities. Some schools struggle with the integration of students who do not participate in the religious traditions of their school. Reflecting upon this point during an interview, the Vice Principal at a K-8 school expressed his concern regarding the school's initial decision to join the choice program:

> *"It was important to me, and many people in our parish, to maintain the Catholic identity of the school."* [39]

Additionally, students attending religious schools, including those who share the faith of their school and those who do not, face the challenge of potentially being surrounded by peers with beliefs that are slightly or distinctly different from their own. This raises concerns for some school stakeholders about whether enrolling students from other religious backgrounds may weaken the culture and community.

When parents choose to enroll their children in a religious school but opt out of participating in the traditions associated with it, the school must accommodate these students. Religious schools face the challenge of encouraging all students to embrace their key values, while simultaneously taking into consideration that not all students share their beliefs and religious practices. Interviews at one Catholic school indicated that the first year of participation in the Choice Program was challenging because many choice students elected not to attend the weekly Mass. One instructor unapologetically explained the feelings of some of the school's staff:

> *"If you don't believe in God, sorry about that, but it's a religious school and I'm going to talk about it."* [40]

The staff of MPCP schools that openly acknowledge their religiosity tend to expect students to accept that religion as a major aspect of their school experience.

Integrating Religion throughout Curriculum

The role of religion seemed to be pervasive in almost all of the sectarian schools we visited. In fact, it was hard to distinguish religious activities from other activities given the common occurrence of class periods starting with the reading of a Bible verse or prayer and religious topic areas being dispersed throughout class lectures. During site visits, researchers observed how the topic areas discussed at Mass and Chapel services spilled over

39 E4 Principal Interview, Fall 2011.

40 E4 Teacher Interview, Fall 2011.

into classroom discussions. A teacher at one Catholic K-8 school discussed how religion is intertwined into all school activities:

> *"We intertwine religion daily. It's not just that we go to Mass Wednesday morning… or it's not just that we teach religion…it's integrated into everything we do."* [41]

In another Christian school, religion was also found to be a major focus. The principal stated that the culture of the school is "first and foremost based on Scripture" and that they try to emulate and live the teachings of Jesus on a daily basis. Nevertheless, there were clear examples of schools that anticipate students will not participate in religious activities. School administrators make a variety of provisions for students who do not participate. For instance, one school conducts prayer about 30 minutes prior to the official start of school. Another school expects all students to arrive at the same time, but students who do not participate in prayer go into study hall and are monitored by teachers.

Creating a Safe Environment for all Students

Teachers and administrators at several schools we visited emphasized the importance of nurturing a community that is tolerant of everyone's belief and religious practices. Teachers at E2 and E3, both Catholic K-8 schools serving many non-Catholic families, reported that most students still choose to participate in the school's religious activities even though they are not Catholic. At E4, the non-Catholic students feel comfortable participating in religious activities because they focus on general character development instead of strictly Catholic doctrine:

> *"I don't know if we're changing their mind about religion, I do think we are helping them become better people with the character ed. and that kind of stuff."* [42]

This same school encourages student integration by organizing a regular 'Mix it Up Lunch' where students are encouraged to eat with students other than those with whom they usually socialize.

41 E4 Teacher Interview, Fall 2011.

42 E4 Teacher Interview, Fall 2011.

Table 6.2: K-8 Religion and Integration

Common Practices	E1	E2	E3	E4	ES1	ES2	ES3
Integrating religion throughout curriculum	x	x	x	x		x	x
Mass, chapel or other related activities	x	x	x	x		x	x
Making provisions for students who opt out of faith based activities	x						
Creating a safe environment for all students [discusses religious tolerance]			x	x	x	x	
Strong connections between school and home				x		x	x

Note: Color-coding of schools refers to performance rankings defined in Tables 3 and 4. Green schools are above average in both math and reading; red schools are below average in both math and reading.

Strong Connections between School and Home

In the religious schools that appear to have the greatest level of success in both integrating all students and making accommodations where necessary, one commonality the researchers noticed was a strong connection between school and home. Previously highlighted in the school culture section, E4 goes to great lengths to involve parents in the school community. Perhaps as a result of this effort, when surveyed, 20 out of 23 teachers at this school reported that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that their school was in danger of losing its religious identity. Similarly, at ES2 there appears to be very high levels of commitment to the school among students and families because of its religious orientation. The school is the centerpiece of the surrounding local community, and members of the broader religious community relocate from other parts of the county because of its reputation.

> *"90% of the parents who send their children to our school want their children to have the type of religious experience our school offers. Our school is in strong partnership with the homes our children come from. We try to protect our students from outside influences."* [43]

Summary

Some of the challenges we observed regarding religion and integration were common across both the high school and K-8 school levels. Participation in the MPCP has drastically changed the student demographics in many of the schools we visited, and, as a result, has greatly affected how the schools, teachers and administrators

43 Administrator interview at ES2.

work to maintain the religious foundation of their school while taking into consideration the differing faiths of many of their students. Both sets of schools struggle with making sure that the inclusion of students who do not practice the faith of their school does not weaken the religious traditions of their campus.

Some of the most common practices reported at the K-8 and high school levels involved the creation of a safe environment for all students, without pressure to participate in religious activities. This practice was reported by four of the five above average elementary schools, for example. When such activities are grounded more in general character development instead of specific religious doctrines, it appears that students feel more comfortable participating. Lastly, at the K-8 level, one often repeated common practice focused on creating strong connections between the school and home. It appears that schools that forge relationships with parents outside of the school are more likely to receive full student participation in religious activities.

7. School Facilities and Infrastructure

Improvements in school facilities and infrastructure can have varying effects on school performance. There is some evidence that cosmetic improvements have less positive effects on teaching and learning than structural investments.[44] The age of the building, standard of maintenance and renovation; acoustics and noise, light, ventilation and thermal comfort, and air quality all are among the improvements that are known to positively impact teaching and learning.[45] The condition of a school's facilities not only influences outcomes for students, but also a school's ability to attract and retain teachers. In this section, we describe the general observations that were made during the school visits about the facilities, and we summarize the comments some respondents made about the school infrastructure during the interviews and teacher surveys.[46]

Common Challenges

The school facilities ranged from well-manicured campuses to traditional single large buildings to commercial spaces that have been remodeled. Three of the six high schools appeared to have adequate space and resources to support comprehensive academic and extra-curricular programs. The older schools were more likely to have adequate space, which often reflects decades of fundraising and other activities necessary to plan and build. Several of the newer schools operated with very modest infrastructure or space. For example, most of these schools did not have a designated technology lab or library, and they used classrooms for multiple purposes,

44 Cash, C. (2009), *Improving Student Achievement and School Facilities in a Time of Limited Funding*, Connexions Content Commons, National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, Washington, DC, available at: http://cnx.org/content/m23100/latest.

45 Duyar, I. (2010). Relationship between school facility conditions and the delivery of instruction; Evidence from a national survey of school principals. *Journal of Facilities Management*. 8, 1, 8; and Schneider, M. (2002), *Do School Facilities Affect Academic Outcomes?*, National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, Washington, DC, available at: www.edfacilities.org/pubs/index.cfm.

46 It should be noted that we visited the high schools during the spring, and we refined the instruments used to assess school facilities. Thus, we were much better prepared in the fall when we observed the elementary schools. This section will provide greater detail about we discovered in the K-8 schools compared to the high schools.

including serving meals. These schools were more likely to be located in converted commercial buildings or shared school facilities, with plans to expand or move into more suitable school space contingent upon additional funding. In either case, these schools were less likely to have a full range of large common spaces within or outside of the building, and they were also less likely to have libraries, computer labs and other resource rooms.

From some of the high school teachers' perspectives, the facilities influence their overall satisfaction with the school. The teacher survey did not specifically ask respondents for their views on school facilities; but teachers were asked to rate their satisfaction with the "resources I need to effectively teach". Overall, 55.6% said that they were "satisfied" and a further 22.2% "very satisfied" with school resources. In two of the older schools, there was 100% satisfaction with the schools' resources; rates of dissatisfaction (including "dissatisfied" and "very dissatisfied") ranged between 14.3% and 57.2% among the other schools. There were no notable differences in levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction between teachers at small schools and those at larger schools; neither did these seem to vary by the range of facilities available. However, higher levels of dissatisfaction were expressed by teachers working in school buildings originally designed for a different purpose, (e.g. non-traditional or shared school space).

The dissatisfaction these teachers express may have less to do with what happens in the building, but more a reaction to where the schools are physically located. Schools that are located in high poverty and relatively high crime neighborhoods pose a unique set of challenges for students and staff traveling to and from them.

K-8 Schools

The physical school environment and range of facilities varied considerably between the seven K-8 schools that we visited. Despite their differences, we found that the schools shared common challenges and were addressing these in similar ways. Overall, as in the case of the high schools, all K-8 schools were clean and apparently safe, regardless of the location and other factors. We observed a variety of school facilities, including a brand new building with all new furniture; a school that shared a much larger building with another school; a school that used classrooms in a bigger existing school; and a school that operated in two buildings blocks apart.

Despite these different school arrangements and configurations, the common challenge they shared boiled down to financial resource constraints and consequently a lack of infrastructure such as a library, cafeteria, gymnasium or computer lab. Only one of the K-8 schools had a full range of resources, but even here, the school used the air conditioning sparingly to conserve money. The common challenges that were most frequently noted were:

- Lack of space for whole-school events requiring the participation of all students, teachers and administrators;
- Time wasted while students travel between rooms and buildings, particularly during adverse weather conditions; and
- Raising adequate funding to improve the school facilities.

The K-8 schools uniformly address their challenges by optimizing the facilities, often making the best use of multi-purpose rooms and common spaces.

Common Practices

The K-8 schools demonstrated several noteworthy common practices, including the creative use of wall space, efficient coordination of activities, accommodating students with disabilities and shared use of mobile laptops and libraries. There are two other common practices that are worth noting in greater detail:

1. Creative use of wall space – one new school maximizes the physical space to promote a college going culture by using every aspect of the building to reinforce the school motto, which includes college posters and banners on the walls, student T-shirts with college logos, and college acceptance letters posted in the reception and other common areas.
2. Multi-purpose use of space: in several schools, it was clear that they are years and millions of dollars away from securing a permanent facility or expanding their current buildings to fully meet their space needs. Thus, creatively and efficiently using their current common spaces is more a science than an art. For example, in one school a single room was often used for a variety of purposes including prayer, school assemblies and all meals.

Summary

The majority of K-8 and high schools in the sample are experiencing resource constraints which are having an impact on the physical environment of the school and its facilities; yet, most of the teachers and administrators expressed high levels of satisfaction with the school infrastructure or facilities. In general, the schools attempt to make the best of what they have, and have adopted a variety of creative strategies in order to do so. There was no obvious evidence that a lack of facilities is having an adverse impact on students, especially in the K-8 schools, other than minor inconveniences such as having to bring in their own lunch or walk between buildings located some distance apart. Many of the schools are facing particular challenges related to aging buildings, limited or shared facilities and the need to make creative use of available space and resources. It is likely these factors do influence teaching and student outcomes, particularly at the high school level. It was particularly notable that some of the newer high schools do not currently have the facilities necessary to fully support a rigorous academic environment and post-secondary preparation.

The physical location of a school and its sense of permanency appear to play an important role in building community and maintaining an air of safety around the school. Nearly all the schools that have been in existence for 20 years or more are located in neighborhoods where the surrounding community has embraced the school, which helps to buffer the school from unwanted urban influences. Three of the four above average K-8 schools, for example, report strong relationships with the surrounding community. On the other hand, the newer and specialty schools often are located in non-traditional, temporary and shared school facilities. It has been more difficult for these schools to build an identity and form intimate connections with the surrounding community.

8. Conclusion

The school visits were designed to help us better understand the various challenges faced by choice schools and the different and potentially innovative strategies they used to address them.

The Executive Summary provides a detailed overview of the key lessons learned. Although we cannot make a causal claim about the relationship between the percentage of MPCP students and school-level test-score performance, in this particular sample we observed that schools that enroll a modest-to-moderate proportion of choice students tend to post higher academic test scores than the schools that enroll a high proportion or are all choice students. There are exceptions, however, such as one school we visited that was both overwhelmingly choice students and relatively high performing. There are several reasons one could surmise why schools with lower percentages of choice students might have higher test scores including that higher-performing schools are more attractive to tuition- paying families, all choice students are low-income (though that recently changed), and schools may be insufficiently prepared to accommodate effectively a large number of disadvantaged students.

These results are tentative and descriptive. Future attempts to explore choice schools may more rigorously relate student achievement, attainment, and post secondary success with various aspects of private schools than we were able to do here. Still, we think this peek into the real world of school choice in Milwaukee offers useful suggestions for schools struggling to deliver an effective education to disadvantaged inner-city students.

Appendix A

Sample High School Interview Instrument

Principal Interview Guide

Part One: Basic Information

1. How many years total have you been working at this school? (This may include years serving as a teacher, counselor, etc.)
2. How many years have you been the principal at this school?
3. How many years have you been a school administrator?
4. Please describe the types of schools that you have served as a leader (urban/suburban/rural, grades, etc).
5. Please describe the types of schools that you served in any other capacity (teacher, coach, etc.)

Part Two: Aspirations and Expectations

6. Based on interactions with your students, how confident are you that your students will be successful in life? What does success look like to you?
7. What is your approach to dealing with struggling students? (prompt: Do you have personnel/procedures for dealing with them?)
8. When dealing with struggling students, do you reach a point when you feel like you have done all you can do? (If yes, what happens to those students?)
9. If a student fails in your school, who do you think is responsible?

Part Three: School Services for Students

10. What is the role of your school counselor?
11. Describe the test preparation your school provides for college entrance exams? (ACT, SAT) (Prompts: What percentage of your students takes advantage of this service? Do you waive fees/provide transportation?
12. Describe the programs that you offer regarding career guidance to your students?
13. What programs do you have for students to visit college campuses or visit with college recruiters at your school?
14. What kinds of support do you offer to ensure that students graduate?
15. What hurdles exist for your students to attend college and what does your school do to address those?
16. Do you keep data on what percentage of students attend and graduate from college?

Part Four: School Practices and Procedures

17. What do you do to bring out the best in your teaching staff?
18. What are your criteria for hiring a teacher?
19. How do teachers know what you expect of them?
20. What corrective actions do you take if a teacher is not meeting your expectations?

Part Five: School Culture

21. How would you describe the type of culture you are trying to create at your school?
22. What is your attendance rate at parent teacher conferences?
23. Are you pleased with the amount of parental involvement at your school? Why or why not?
24. What do you do to encourage parents to be involved in your school community? Are there any requirements?
25. Do you require students to do community service?

Part Six: Attainment

26. Think of your current twelfth grade class. What do you expect them to be doing at this time next year? How many do you think will attend college?
27. What do you think are the top 3 reasons why students drop out before graduating from your school?
28. Some of the research suggests that graduation rates appear to be higher in choice schools than in non-choice schools. What is your perception of this?

Open Ended Finale:

What do you think are the one or two most important things that this school does to ensure that students graduate and move on to employment or post-secondary education?

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